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SUBJECT: TFIZ01:SYRIA CLOSES BORDER AND SAYS IT WILL SET UP

REFUGEE CAMPS ON IRAQI SIDE OF THE BORDER

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR THEODORE H. KATTOUF FOR REASONS 1.5B/D

**¶11.** (S) SUMMARY. SARG MINISTER OF LOCAL AFFAIRS CONVENED UN/IO REPS AT 23:00 ON MARCH 19 TO INFORM THEM THE BORDER WITH IRAQ HAD CLOSED, BUT THAT THE SARG AND THE SYRIAN RED CRESCENT WOULD SET UP THREE REFUGEE CAMPS IN IRAQI TERRITORY OR THE "NO MAN'S LAND BETWEEN THE TWO BORDERS." HE STATED THAT THE SARG WOULD PROVIDE SECURITY FOR THE CAMPS (DIRECTLY CONTRADICTING STATEMENTS MADE BY DFM MU'ALLIM TO AMBASSADOR THE MORNING OF MARCH 19, SEE PARA 3), UPON WHICH UN REPS QUESTIONED THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SENDING SYRIAN MILITARY/SECURITY ELEMENTS INTO IRAQ AT THIS TIME. YASIN ASKED FOR RELIEF MATERIALS AND HELP DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE AT THE CAMPS. HE SAID THE SARG IS WILLING TO ALLOW TCNS IF UNHCR WILL RECEIVE THEM AT ITS EL HOL REFUGEE CAMP. THE UN DOUBTS THE SARG/RED CRESCENT HAS THE CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO A REFUGEE CRISIS ALONE. THE UN/IO COMMUNITY WAS TAKEN BY SURPRISE BY THE SARG'S REVERSAL AND IS SCRAMBLING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S NEXT. THERE DOES NOT YET APPEAR TO BE A LARGE NUMBER OF REFUGEE SEEKERS AT THE BORDER. END SUMMARY.

**¶12.** (C) AT 23:00 ON MARCH 19, SARG MINISTER OF LOCAL AFFAIRS SALAH YASIN CONVOKED REPRESENTATIVES FROM UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, IOM, AND ICRC TO CONVEY THE SARG'S POSITION ON REFUGEES AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE. HE SAID:

-- THE SARG, ALREADY BURDENED BY PALESTINIAN AND GOLAN REFUGEES, HAD CLOSED ITS BORDERS AND WOULD KEEP THEM CLOSED FOR THE DURATION OF HOSTILITIES.

-- SYRIA IS COMMITTED TO PROVIDING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE. WITH THE SYRIAN RED CRESCENT AND INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS/RED CRESCENT (IFRC) THE SARG WILL ESTABLISH THREE CAMPS 8-10 KILOMETERS INTO IRAQ NEAR THE THREE MAJOR BORDER CROSSINGS OF AL TANF (SOUTH), ABU KAMAL (CENTRAL), AND YAROBIAH (NORTH).

-- THE SARG WOULD ENSURE THE SECURITY OF THE CAMPS (THIS DIRECTLY CONTRADICTED WHAT DFM MU'ALLIM TOLD AMBASSADOR THE MORNING OF MARCH 19, SEE PARA 3).

-- THE SARG WOULD ALLOW TCNS INTO THE COUNTRY IF UNHCR WOULD RECEIVE THEM AT ITS EL HOL REFUGEE CAMP.

-- THE SARG HOPED THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY WOULD PROVIDE SUPPLIES (TENTS, SHELTER FACILITIES, FOOD) AND ASSISTANCE DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE (WATER, ELECTRICITY, SANITATION).

-- NO GROUND HAD BEEN BROKEN ON ANY OF THE CAMPS, BUT THE SARG THOUGHT THEY COULD BE READY IN A WEEK AND HAVE A CAPACITY OF 100,000 IF ALL PARTIES COOPERATED.

**¶13.** (S) CONFLICTING MESSAGES FROM SARG ON CROSS-BORDER RELIEF: CONTACTS WHO ATTENDED THE MEETING TOLD POLOFF ON MARCH 20 THEY WERE ASTONISHED BY THE SARG'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT IT WOULD SET UP CAMPS IN IRAQI TERRITORY. THEY IMMEDIATELY ASKED WHO WOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SECURITY AND IF THE SARG HAD FULLY CONSIDERED THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH AN ACTION. YASIN REPLIED THAT SYRIAN "ELEMENTS" WOULD ENSURE SECURITY FOR THE CAMPS. (NOTE: THIS DIRECTLY CONTRADICTED WHAT SARG DFM WALID MU'ALLIM TOLD THE AMBASSADOR EARLIER THE SAME DAY: THAT SYRIA COULD NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SECURITY OF ANY REFUGEES, SINCE IT WOULD NOT KNOW WHO THEY

WERE; THAT SYRIAN MILITARY FORCES WOULD NOT LEAVE SYRIA AND THEIR PURPOSE WOULD BE TO PREVENT REFUGEES FROM ENTERING SYRIA; AND THAT ONLY HUMANITARIAN WORKERS, SYRIAN RED CRESCENT AND AFFILIATED UN/NGO, WOULD CROSS THE BORDER TO ASSIST THE REFUGEES AND PROVIDE SUPPLIES. END NOTE.) YASIN REPORTEDLY SIDESTEPPED THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, BUT BACKTRACKED ON THE EXACT LOCATION OF THE CAMPS, SAYING THAT THEY MIGHT BE LOCATED IN THE "NO MAN'S LAND" BETWEEN THE TWO BORDERS (WHICH THE UN DOES NOT BELIEVE LEGALLY EXISTS.)

¶4. (C) RED CRESCENT IN CHARGE, NOT A GOOD THING: YASIN MADE IT CLEAR THAT THE RED CRESCENT (WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE IFRC) WOULD TAKE THE LEAD ON CROSS-BORDER REFUGEE RELIEF, A PROSPECT THAT EMBASSY INTERLOCUTORS CONTEMPLATED WITH SOMETHING AKIN TO DREAD. UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, AND ICRC HAVE LONG EXPRESSED DOUBTS ABOUT THE RED CRESCENT'S CAPACITY TO DEAL WITH A REFUGEE CRISIS. UN STAFF AND RED CRESCENT PRESIDENT DR. ATTAR "HAVE NOT BEEN ON SPEAKING TERMS FOR MONTHS," SAID ONE UN REPRESENTATIVE. ANOTHER CONTACT SAID ATTAR, A PROMINENT AND WELL-CONNECTED BUSINESSMAN, HAD AN EGO IN INVERSE PROPORTION TO HIS EXPERIENCE OR ABILITIES. EVEN WITH THE EXPERTISE AND MATERIAL ASSISTANCE OF THE IFRC, MOST FELT THERE WAS NO WAY THAT THE RED CRESCENT WAS UP TO THE TASK. AN IOM OFFICIAL SAID, ONLY HALF-JOKINGLY, THAT THE ONLY WAY THE RED CRESCENT COULD HANDLE THE SITUATION WAS IF SYRIA DEPLOYED ITS ENTIRE ARMY TO ASSIST.

¶5. (C) NO REFUGEES, BUT TCN'S POSSIBLE: YASIN CONFIRMED THAT NO/NO REFUGEES WOULD BE ALLOWED TO CROSS THE BORDER, BUT SAID THE SARG WOULD ALLOW TCNS TO ENTER SYRIA PROVIDED UNHCR WOULD RECEIVE THEM AT EL HOL. UNHCR, WHO MANAGES EL HOL AND IS NOT MANDATED TO TAKE CARE OF TCNS, AND UNICEF, WHO HAS DONE MOST OF THE CAMP'S INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT, WERE (INITIALLY, AT LEAST) OPPOSED TO THE IDEA OF ALLOWING TCNS AT EL HOL. IOM DOES NOT HAVE AN ALTERNATE SITE TO HOUSE THE 3,000 TCNS EXPECTED AND IS NOT EQUIPPED TO DEAL WITH THEM WITHOUT COOPERATION FROM UNHCR AND OTHER UN AGENCIES.

¶6. (C) UN IN DISARRAY/NEXT STEPS: A GENUINELY SURPRISED UN/IO COMMUNITY, WHICH APPEARS NOT TO HAVE QUESTIONED THE SARG'S ASSURANCES THAT IT WOULD KEEP THE BORDERS OPEN DESPITE ITS LACK OF PREPARATION AND COMMUNICATION, IS NOW SCRAMBLING TO CLARIFY THE SARG'S POSITION AND REORGANIZE.

-- UNHCR APPEARS TO BE HOLDING OUT HOPE THE SARG WILL REVERSE ITS POSITION AND HAS BEEN IN NON-STOP MEETINGS WITH SARG OFFICIALS. ON MARCH 20, THE MFA DENIED UNHCR PERMISSION TO SEND OBSERVERS TO THE BORDER CROSSINGS TO ASSESS THE SITUATION AND TOLD UNHCR TO WAIT UNTIL AN OFFICIAL SARG ANNOUNCEMENT RE REFUGEE/HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE WAS RELEASED (TO BE EXPECTED IN 2-3 DAYS). UNHCR IS OPPOSED TO, BUT STILL CONSIDERING, THE QUESTION OF TCNS AT EL HOL.

-- ICRC HAS KICKED DECISION-MAKING UP TO GENEVA AND IS MEETING WITH THE (NEWLY ESTABLISHED) IFRC DELEGATION WHILE AWAITING THE RETURN OF THE SYRIAN RED CRESCENT PRESIDENT FROM GENEVA TO COORDINATE THE MOVEMENT'S POSITION. IN ANTICIPATING FUTURE COOPERATION WITH THE SARG, ICRC IS NOT HEARTENED BY THE FACT THAT AFTER MONTHS OF NEGOTIATING, IT HAS STILL NOT BEEN ABLE TO BRING NON-FOOD ITEMS FOR 20,000 INTO SYRIA FROM AQABA.

-- IOM IS NEGOTIATING WITH UNHCR REGARDING THE TCN ISSUE AND IS SURREPTITIOUSLY SENDING STAFF TO THE BORDERS.

-- WFP, WHICH HAD CONCENTRATED MUCH OF ITS PLANNING ON CROSS-BORDER FOOD DISTRIBUTION IS THE LEAST Affected BY THE POLICY CHANGE AND IS SITTING TIGHT.

¶7. (C) NO LARGE BACK-UP AT BORDER, YET: INFORMATION IS STILL SKETCHY ABOUT THE SITUATION AT THE BORDER, AS UN AGENCIES HAVE BEEN DENIED OFFICIAL PERMISSION TO TRAVEL THERE. BUT ANECDOTAL REPORTS AND A SURVEY OF THE UN/IO COMMUNITY SUGGEST THERE ARE CURRENTLY NO MORE THAN 100-200 REFUGEE SEEKERS AT THE OFFICIAL IRAQI/SYRIAN BORDER CROSSINGS.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: GIVEN LOCAL AFFAIRS MINISTER YASIN'S POSITION

OUTSIDE INNER SARG DECISION-MAKING CIRCLES, WE DOUBT THAT HIS STATEMENT OF SARG INTENT TO PROVIDE SECURITY FOR CAMPS INSIDE IRAQ IS ACCURATE. AMBASSADOR KATTOUF QUESTIONED DFM MU'ALLIM CLOSELY ON THIS POINT, AND MU'ALLIM WAS VERY CLEAR. HOWEVER, YASIN'S DISJOINTED PRESENTATION TO THE INTERNATIONAL RELIEF COMMUNITY IS TROUBLING, AND REFLECTS SARG DISARRY AS IT SCRAMBLES TO DEAL WITH THE US-LED ATTACK ON IRAQ. GIVEN THE LIMITED CAPABILITIES OF THE SYRIAN RED CRESCENT (DESPITE SIGNIFICANT ASSISTANCE FROM THE IFRC) IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE CAMPS BEING SET UP WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT NGO INVOLVEMENT. END COMMENT.

KATTOUF